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Research to Practice: Innovations in Employment Supports: Washington State's Division of Developmental Disabilities

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Innovations in Employment Supports: Washington State's Division of Developmental Disabilities

by John Butterworth, Ph.D. and Allison Cohen, M.A.

As evidence of the positive outcomes associated with integrated employment develops it is important to identify policy and practices at the state level that expand access to employment opportunity. This brief presents findings from Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) case study research focused on state agencies that support individuals with developmental disabilities.

Early Commitment to Employment

Stakeholders in Washington attribute the roots of the state's focus on employment to values-based training based on the Program Analysis of Social Services (PASS 3)¹ model that began in the late 1970s. These workshops were widely attended over several years, and many of today's key players in state and county services participated as leaders in the PASS training. One of the outcomes of this period was the first edition of the County Guidelines, a document that guides contracting with counties and service providers. The clear emphasis on employment established in the guidelines has been nurtured by a system of management that allows a clear focus on employment at the county level.

Washington also served as an early laboratory for innovation in employment opportunities. Strong linkages with researchers at the University of Oregon and the University of Washington provided a platform for questioning the status quo and developing alternative models for employment support. This emphasis on innovation has continued in county level pilot projects and state and county support for training and technical assistance.

The consistency of stakeholder commitment to employment as the primary goal of day supports was striking. Factors that were attributed to supporting this commitment include:

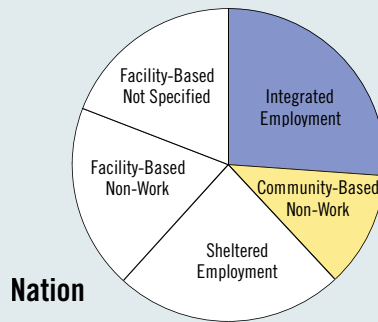
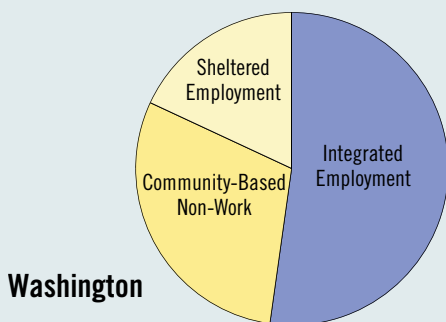
- **Clear focus on employment outcomes at the county level.** Day supports are managed at the county level in Washington, while case management and living supports are managed at the state level. This has helped County Coordinators to focus their efforts on supporting local, community-based employment opportunities. In addition, non-work services are clearly viewed as a temporary or fall-back option for people for whom it is difficult to find meaningful employment. In FY2002 the state employment outcomes data collection indicated a total earned income of \$21.8 million for individuals supported by county services.

The counties biggest investment is in day services. If you are a person who is convinced about it you have lots of room to maneuver.

- **Strong network of leaders.** A long-standing network of stakeholders in state and county government, providers, and the advocacy community grew out of the early values-based training and development of the county guidelines. These stakeholders have continued to share information and collaborate, and innovations have spread rapidly through the state.

Mostly I believe that the only safeguard for people with DD is how people think about them...if we don't have impact on values you put people at risk.

In FY2001 Washington's Department of Developmental Disabilities reported that 56% of individuals receiving day and employment supports were working in integrated employment for at least part of the work week. This places Washington among the top five states based on the percent of individuals in integrated employment.



These data were collected as part of the National Survey of State MR/DD Agencies administered by the Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston. Descriptive information was collected during a series of on-site and telephone interviews during the Winter of 2003 conducted by ICI staff.

- **Local innovation.** The county structure has also provided a source of innovation. County property tax dollars, representing a small percent of the county DDD office budget, provide a flexible resource that counties have used for demonstration projects and technical assistance activities. One successful initiative that has spread across the state is a robust program of developing jobs for supported employees in county, state and city government.
- **Limited funding for facility-based non-work services.** The county system does not support traditional facility-based non-work day programs such as day habilitation or day activity services. Currently less than 40 individuals statewide receive Adult Day Health services as a result of a transfer of this service from Aging services in 1996.
- **Initiatives to reduce sheltered employment services.** Some counties have explicit goals to reduce or eliminate sheltered employment within their service areas.
- **Ongoing investment in training and technical assistance.** In addition to the early investment in values training, the state has maintained a strong investment in employment-related training and technical assistance. The state contracts with two entities to provide and broker training activities, and maintains active relationships with a wide variety of external consultants. For many years the state has hosted the well-known Ellensburg conference as a chance for all levels of staff, from front-line day and employment staff to agency administrators, to learn about innovations in the field. Collectively these activities provide ongoing opportunities for networking, debate, and sharing innovations.

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